

## Final Touches

by Tessa Nelson-Humphries

"I can't believe I've done it!" I said to no one in particular, setting down the phone after putting my beloved Kentucky country cottage on the market. My throat felt so tight I thought I'd have to have a tracheotomy. Like the widow who'd owned the house before me, I'd lost the war, sabotaged finally by an increasingly dangerous tractor and a winter the severity and length of which beggared all description.

"What is past is prologue," wrote a well-known citizen of Stratford-on-Avon some centuries ago. It is indeed.

We had bought the quaint little house from a widow whose only reason for selling was that after *her* husband's death she couldn't manage the acreage. She didn't even drive, so that both the extensive mowing and the enforced isolation booby trapped her. The memory of her uncontrollable weeping when her son led her down the long path for the last time a dozen years ago is still haunting. Now it was my turn.

Since my own husband's death six years ago, I had managed to soldier on. I am younger and fitter than my predecessor was and I do drive, so I'd managed to mow the eight acres each year from April until into November and convey groceries and other necessities the ten miles from the nearest small town. I'd learned to anticipate the far too frequent power outages of TVA in my all-electric dwelling and cornered quite a market in oil lamps, candles, and dicey kerosene stoves. I'd learned not to be afraid living far from neighbors. I'd juggled my university teaching career with endless country chores.

But last winter undermined all my defenses when I was snowed in for over a week and also became ill. As usual, the wretched power failed. I had no energy to pump the little camping stove even if I could have dragged myself to the basement to get it. Whenever power was off the water pump shut down too, so no toilet flushing, no baths. Zero! As fantastically beautiful though the cottage and its surroundings were, I reluctantly decided it was utterly foolhardy to continue. It was time to say goodbye to the ever-present fear of a serious accident which could cause me to lie undiscovered for days.

"Don't feel bad," friends consoled. "C. would be proud of you, the way you've managed. And you not even a country girl!"

The phone rang off the wall and within a week the property was snapped up. These "baby farms" are always in demand and ours was super-appealing with all the imaginative modernizing we'd done. Its thickly-wooded acreage extending down to the shoals of the Clear Fork River added to its privacy and desirability.

Sale stamped and sealed, I took the dogs one grim, gray afternoon and began making some final touches.

First stop, the little copse dappled with sunlight that June day when my husband's

ashes, as he'd wished, were scattered. His dogs, "Bruno," a rescued stray, and "Truffles," a Doberman, had sat motionless as the soft gray dust drifted. Later, I'd planted masses of daffodils under the slender dogwoods which I now touched gently as I passed.

Next, down to the flat, lichen-covered rock overhanging the rippling shoals. We'd often sat there together, the water's murmur reminding me of the peaty streams in my Yorkshire homeland half a world away.

Then, along the riverbank, to the old ford where, at the turn of the century, cattle crossed. We'd seen a mother 'possum there once, babies clinging to her. Another day we'd looked into the cold eyes of an enormous blacksnake curled round a branch.

"Wicked-looking, but harmless!" biologist C. had said. "Good for keeping rodents down."

From the lonely ford I climbed through bleak winter-bare woods into what we'd dubbed "Our Lower 48," the huge meadow where insolent rabbits raided C's garden patch and an occasional skunk left a knockdown whiff!

Crossing the stubble, I lingered under the pear tree where "Luath Yorkshire Lad," the handsome golden retriever who had seen me through an earlier tragedy, lay under a rough stone printed simply "Luath 1961-1973." A few yards away, beneath the old apple tree whose branches always gently tapped the kitchen window, lay "Chispa Yorkshire Lass," another beloved golden. No stone, for there was no one by then to help me lift one. But dozens of narcissi, creamy like her soft coat, bloom each spring under this, her favorite tree. Oddly, her dates, 1971-1983, resemble those of her older companion, though a decade later.

A brief pause for farewell and I moved on round the corner of the neat white house with its black shutters until I stood under the junipers we'd planted when we first moved in. How we had cherished them, hand-carrying water during dry spells, willing them to grow. They did. Now they topped the cottage, only bowing to heavy snow. I touch them briefly, sadly, and move on to the blue spruce, another memorial to C. It is growing well. Robins nested there last spring. Will they again?

On to the fierce, strong holly which stares boldly in through C's den window and then down the side of the cottage to where a mass of comfrey, gift of friends, flourishes each summer, its bell-like flowers a magnet for bees. Memories of our delight in it engulf me as I pass on to the maples whose fall russets, scarlets and yellows snatched our breath. Those same colors splash each year across our woods and over the mountains beyond the river. It was one of our simple treats to sit and revel in the fabulous patchwork. Despite today's growing chill and the wind sighing in the now-bare branches, I sit briefly. Nearby crouches the stump of the ancient elm which I'd had to have cut down because it threatened the roof. I remembered now how I'd felt as if I'd betrayed a friend. Still, there'd been a small consolation in using the truncated remains as a bird table for cardinals and other birds. I patted the bark for the last time. One final touch.

So, alone on that bleak afternoon, light fading, I bade these small farewells. My sturdy little house, built by a Kentucky mountain man for his bride long ago, had sheltered me longer than any place I'd lived in my gypsy life. So many memories, sad, funny, silly. So many final touches made . . . and to be made. Suddenly, things didn't seem so hard any more. It was as if the little house were still offering strength. Certain, somehow, that it would do that for the new owners, and those who would come after them, I climbed the stone steps and closed the cottage door.